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1

Reading experimental literature: unreadability, discomfort and reading strategies

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In what follows I discuss unreadability and its relation to reading and interpretation of experimental literature. What precisely does unreadability mean? Where can it be located? How far does it impede reading and can it be overcome? I want to address these questions within the frameworks of narratology and literary pragmatics, and suggest that in some cases, if not most, unreadability is a productive textual quality: it forces the reader to look for new reading strategies. Located in the text and in the reader, unreadability may be described as a reading difficulty as well as its effect. It is produced by complications on the levels of textual comprehension and interpretation. In other words, the reader, if encountering a text that resists sense-making or meaning-making, is faced with a problem of finding reading strategies that would 'fit' the given text and help uncover its meaning.

I discuss the unreadable in relation to comprehension and interpretation, which – inevitably, it seems – will draw on examples from what is considered experimental fiction. I start by looking into the phenomena of readability and unreadability, their effects and connotations. To understand the causes of reading difficulties, I then adopt Nils Erik Enkvist's pragmatic approach towards understanding literature and test it on the examples from Futurist poetry by Mykhajl' Semenko and from Gertrude Stein; these texts are typically considered 'unreadable'.[1] Dealing with these texts leads me, in the final part of the chapter, to discuss reading strategies that are at play before, during and after reading unconventional fiction. Some of these strategies, such as naturalization, have already been described in detail but nevertheless need revisiting, and some that have been observed just recently, such as 'Zen reading', need closer scrutiny.

Unreadability: its meaning, location and effects

Essentially, 'unreadable' simply means 'incapable of being read'. This happens, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*), because the text is '1. Illegible through ill-formed or indistinct characters', or '2. Not interesting, enjoyable, or engaging enough for the reader to continue reading', or '3. Physically inaccessible to a reader' (*OED* s.v. 'unreadable').[2] In literary critical language, however, this qualifier encompasses questions as to why certain texts are more difficult than others to understand and whether these reading difficulties can be overcome, leaving physical illegibility aside. Often used as a synonym for 'uninterpretable', 'unreadable' also frequently refers to 'experimental' (see Federman 24; Orr 131).[3] But all three qualifiers escape a more precise description.

In search for more precision let me start from the opposite position: what does it mean if one says that a book is 'readable'? Readability has many connotations as well: from legibility, comprehensibility, clarity, to more subjective judgements of being 'easy, enjoyable, or interesting to read; written in a lively or attractive style' (*OED* s.v. 'readable'). As Raymond Federman, a writer of experimental fiction himself, puts it, readability is 'what reassures us in a text … of what we already know, what comforts us because we easily and pleasurably recognize the world (at a glance) and ourselves in the world (at another glance) in what we read' (26). The pleasure of recognition and familiarity seems to be crucial here. Federman's formulation of readability reminds us of Jonathan Culler's description of reading as a process of naturalization. Culler observes that literature in general – and not just its experimental specimens – is

> something other than ordinary communication; its formal and fictional qualities bespeak a strangeness, a power, an organization, a permanence which is foreign to ordinary speech. Yet the urge to assimilate that power and permanence or to let that formal organization work upon us requires us to make literature into a communication, to reduce its strangeness … The strange, the formal, the fictional, must be recuperated or naturalized, brought within our ken, if we do not want to remain gaping before monumental inscriptions. (Culler 134)

To naturalize, in general, means to *understand* literature, that is, to understand it as having a communicative function and 'to bring [a text] into relation with a type of discourse or model which is already, in some

sense, natural and legible' (Culler 138). In the formal sense, then, a readable text is familiar in its form and conventions and its story is constructible. In an ontological sense, which is also implied in Federman's and Culler's descriptions, the familiarity of a readable text can be described in terms of a recognizable world to which it refers. Federman compares readable with realist: 'That comfortableness of readability is there because the text sends the reader back to reality, or allows the reader to play his little mental cinema of realism beyond the language' (28). If this mental cinema of realism means the rolling out of a story, then a readable text is such that can be narrativized and its storyworld is easily constructed and understandable. In this case, however, there is no direct correlation between such two meanings of readability as (1) the ease of recognition of the narrative's storyworld and (2) a quality that makes a text interesting to read. If anything, in laying bare all its tricks or offering no complications such an 'easy' narrative may become quite boring and, in this sense, unreadable. I return to this type of unreadability while discussing Stein's text below.

Narrativization, more generally, refers to a process by which a text is read as a narrative. In the definition of Jan Alber, 'the process of narrativisation consists of giving narrative form to a discourse for the purpose of facilitating a better understanding of the represented phenomena' (Alber, 'Narrativisation' 386); that is, it is a process of emplotment or search for a story. Alber goes on to specify that 'when readers are confronted with difficult or even potentially unreadable texts, they consciously look for ways to recuperate them as narratives' (387). But, if conscious narrativization is a default or privileged approach to an understanding of a fictional text, as Alber implies, what happens if the text obstructs a reconstruction of a story or, more radically, resists narrative logic altogether? I suggest that it is precisely this failure to 'recuperate' certain texts as narratives that can produce the anxious effects of unreadability.

Unreadability, then, is something that cannot be easily narrativized – for the texts whose form is conventionally expected to be narrative – or naturalized otherwise. In other words, an unreadable text cannot be tackled with the help of usual reading strategies. Tanya Clement, for example, observes this about Stein's *The Making of Americans*, whose 'repetitive form, critics argue, renders the reader's usual processes of making meaning useless' (Clement 362). The 'usual' established processes and strategies are those that rely on the dominant conventions of reading and writing existing at a given point in time, which, in turn, draw on the dominant critical-philosophical approaches to literature. Thus, for

example, the novelistic genre conventionally assumes a narrative form, and so in the case of a novel such as *The Making of Americans* the reader sets out by expecting its sentences to construct a story, with characters and events, by providing information relevant for this construction and by omitting insignificant or already-mentioned details, and so on. A usual reading strategy also proceeds by noting relevant formal information for a subsequent overarching interpretation.

Such linear progression through an 'unreadable' text can easily fail: in Stein's text, it will fail because of the sheer abundance of formally significant but story-unrelated information, among other things, which almost demands some sort of computational aid to be processed. But more of this text later. Unreadability is thus often mentioned in the context of negative reactions from readers: Alber, for example, talks of experimental or unusual texts as causing 'considerable, sometimes unsettling interpretative difficulties' ('Impossible Storyworlds' 80): 'feelings of discomfort, fear and worry' (83). Another narratologist, H. Porter Abbott, describes the pain of reading such 'difficult' texts – albeit in a different context for unreadability – coming from the reader's strive to naturalize ('Unreadable Minds' 461), 'the frustrating discord … between the experience of reading and the attempt to create a satisfactory overarching interpretation' (*Real Mysteries* 11). For Federman it is something that 'disorients us in a text' (27).

For the purposes of figuring out what causes this frustrating unreadability and where the roots of the readerly disorientation are located in the text, I would like to take on Enkvist's model for understanding literature. Even though unreadability is located both in the text and in the reader, I shall not address the latter side here in much detail: a cognitive approach would be able to tackle this issue better, with attention to what reactions certain textual features prompt up to what cognitive models and modes of comprehension are activated when readers engage with texts that are difficult for them. Nevertheless, in my attempt to suggest specific textual sources of unreadablity with the help of Enkvist's model the reader is inevitably implied. According to this model, the reader's engagement with literary texts proceeds through levels of intelligibility, comprehension and interpretation. Reading is, essentially, understanding or interpretation, the assigning of meaning to a text rather than a mere ability to reproduce the sounds of the letters on a page (see Rabinowitz 15; Best and Marcus 1), and this understanding can be explained in terms of an interplay of strategies – or procedures – on three levels.

On the starting level of understanding, on the level of *intelligibility*, a text is clear and readable if one recognizes its phonological, lexical and syntactic structures (Enkvist 7). If we are not able to do so because we do not know the language or physically cannot make out the text, this constitutes a fairly simple illegibility and I would like to dismiss it from this discussion. If we are able to do so, we go on to assign a definite meaning (or, a semantic structure) to the text, that is, we *comprehend* its linguistic structures. And then we go on to a more abstract pragmatic level and *interpret* the text or, as Enkvist puts it, 'build around that text a scenario, a text world, a set of states of affairs, in which that text makes sense' (7). So, reading proceeds from the lexical-syntactic to the semantic and ends in the pragmatic.

Such movement of textual understanding, of course, is not unidirectional, and the relations among the three levels are quite complex. The comprehension of a literary text – and here I would like to further Enkvist's argument – is, for example, even more complex than semantic-linguistic comprehension and often already involves (automatized) strategies of naturalization (i.e. certain strategies of interpretation). In general, however, the three distinctions are useful for locating reading strategies and the processes behind them, and can thus help to point out the source of reading difficulties. This model, moreover, applies as well to narrative texts as to non-narrative ones.

Thus, unreadability and the accompanying feelings of discomfort come, arguably, from difficulties on the levels of comprehending or interpreting a text or both, but not on the level of intelligibility. This effect of discomfort comes from a repetitive frustration of the attempts to understand the text locally – when the text fails to make sense on the level of comprehension – or from the inability to link what is being read within a totality of an overarching interpretation. And if the text fails to become meaningful for the reader on one of these levels, then it fails to become interesting, pleasing or easy, and thus readable. Unreadability, to reiterate, arises either from a relationship between textual difficulties or unusualness and readerly disinterest. At the same time, it can be overcome by finding a suitable reading strategy that will get readers through the text or, in other words, will allow them to gather the information necessary to make an interpretation. Before discussing what these ways of reading may be, I propose to take a closer look at several examples of experimental texts that are habitually treated as unreadable: two Futurist poems and a modernist novel.

Examples of the unreadable

Futurists, aggressively going after conventional metre, syntax or general intelligibility of poems, make a good example of the difficulties on the first two levels of reading: on the levels of intelligibility and comprehension (which are always at play at the same time during reading).[4] To make matters more linguistically interesting, let me consider the poems by a Ukrainian poet-Futurist, Mykhajl' Semenko (1892–1937).

The first poem offers a complication on the level of intelligibility. Thematically relying on romanticist images of an idyllic scenery that soothes souls, the poem violates the syntactical rules of Ukrainian by splitting and recombining words and parts of sentences in new ways. Here are its four first lines with a transliteration (to eliminate potential illegibility for non-Ukrainian speakers) and a version of these lines in a standard syntax:

VI тихоплеще сярічка душі кнійсхиливши сясплять комиші біломісяць урічці заснув тишу небайземлі пригорнув	VI tykhoplesche sjarichka dushi knijskhylyvshy sjaspljat komyshi bilomisjats′ urichtsi zasnuv tyshu nebajzemli pryhornuv
Standard syntax:	
Тихо плеще ся річка душі, к ній схилившися сплять комиші. Біло(-)місяць у річці заснув, тишу неба й землі пригорнув.	Tykho plesche sja richka dúshí, k nij skhylyvshysja spljat komyshí. Bilo (-) misjats′ u richtsi zasnuv, tyshu neba j zemli pryhornuv

(Semenko, *Kvero-Futurism*)

This text is phonologically and lexically intelligible: knowing the language, the reader has no difficulty in recognizing separate words and roots of words, prepositions and endings brought together or split in defiance of the syntactical rules of Ukrainian. But some syntactical decisions remain unintelligible and, hence, some comprehension conclusions cannot be arrived at. Working through the level of intelligibility of this poem, the reader has to engage procedures from higher levels too: for example, her knowledge of rhyming patterns to decide where to put the correct stress. The change of stress on the word 'душі'/'dushi' changes the meaning of the phrase 'плеще ся річка душі': 'plesche sja richka dúshi' means 'this river splashes the souls' and 'plesche sja richka dushí' means 'this river of the soul splashes'. But since the rhyming word 'komyshí' has a fixed stress, this ambiguity can be solved. The phrase 'bilomisjats",

however, can mean both 'bilo [adverb] misjats" ('moon, whitely') or 'bilomisjats" ('white moon'). As its syntactical position is unintelligible, on the level of comprehension this phrase's two meanings exist simultaneously, forcefully making the reader aware of the semantic paradigm of the language. These problems with intelligibility do not make the text unreadable but enrich its comprehension and interpretation. However small these complications on the level of syntactical intelligibility, they foreground the moves in comprehension. The most striking feature of this text becomes apparent in reading it aloud: easily recognized phonological and lexemic structures make the reader automatically, through intonation patterns, fill in their syntactic functions, which the text then instantly defeats. This peculiarity of syntax can be interpreted as a statement against the automatization of language use through conventions and learnt structures. The poem itself then becomes a play with the conventions and trite lyrical language of romanticist poetry.

Thus, the first poem, even if not entirely intelligible, is comprehensible and interpretable. The next Semenko text is intelligible only phonologically and, in a very limited way, lexically. It is thus completely incomprehensible but nevertheless could be interpreted:[5]

СТАЛО ЛЬО ТАЛО	STALO LJO TALO
АЛО РЮЗО	ALO RJUZO
ЮЗО	JUZO
БІРЮЗО	BIRJUZO
ОСТАЛО КВАЛЬО МАЛО	OSTALO KVALJO MALO
ЛЬО	LJO
О	O

1914, Kyiv (Semenko, *Derzannja*)

This combination of letters is phonologically intelligible, some lexemes – the roots of some words – can be recognized (e.g. *málo* can mean 'little' or 'it had') but the text is essentially incomprehensible and thus unreadable. Both those who speak Ukrainian and those who do not are in the same position here. Even though speakers of the language may find some familiar roots, it is impossible to assign to them any definite semantic meaning or syntactic functions. But, if an adequate reading strategy is applied, this unreadability can be overcome: if we accept that comprehension is not important for this poem, we skip it and move to the pragmatic level of interpretation. There we can look for ways of explaining the function and meaning of the text, for example, with the help of our knowledge of futuristic poetry

as such, where semantic comprehension is not required. Generally, as new types of texts, for which there were no previously established reading strategies, become widespread, and readers become more and more trained in new conventions of reading, the unreadability effects diminish (cf. Orr 123).

My third example is an excerpt from a perfectly intelligible prose text that is also comprehensible (to those who speak English) but nevertheless a very likely candidate to be put down in frustration as unreadable. Why? Stein's *The Making of Americans: Being a History of a Family's Progress* is a bulky text of over 900 pages that 'defeats meaning making' (Clement 361) because it is repetitive, seemingly chaotic and unsystematic, is called 'a postmodern exercise in incomprehensibility' by its critics (361) and makes its local or global interpretation difficult. Interpretation, when viewed as a search for patterns and structures, fails, because on this level Stein's text becomes too much for the reader to process, with all its repetitions and obscure syntax. An unreadable text 'clogs the machinery', to use Enkvist's metaphor (18), by offering information too great in density that becomes difficult to organize and, hence, unreadable. In the case of *The Making of Americans* this overload is in syntactic information that yields very little new semantic information and thus not much for the reader's default method of constructing a story. Despite narrative expectations provoked by the novel's title ('a history of a family's progress'), it is difficult to read as a linear temporal unfolding of a story about a family because of its peculiar syntactic arrangement. The syntactic patterns evidently bear a lot of significance for the text's meaning but they are too intricate in their interrelation and only very minutely different from each other in their alternations to keep track of during a usual reading.

As an example of the novel's progression I suggest looking at the following excerpt from its first section, where Henry Dehning and his children are introduced. I also list two paragraphs preceding this excerpt (in shortened versions) to demonstrate the interrelation of repetitions between adjacent paragraphs as well as within one paragraph:

> **'Yes', he would often say to his children** […]. **Not that he**, Dehning, was ever very dreadful to his children […]. **No it is only by long** equal living that […]. **No, they only really can** get rid of such a feeling […]. **But mostly** for all children […].
>
> **Not, we repeat**, that the Dehnings had much of such a feeling […] **But always** they had something of that dread in them […].
>
> **'Yes', he would often say to his children**, **'Yes I say to <u>you children</u>**, <u>you have an easy time of it nowadays doing nothing</u>.

Well! What! yes, **you** think you always have to have everything you can ever think of wanting. **Well I guess yes**, **you** have to *have your horses and your teachers and your music and your tutors* and *all kinds of modern improvements* and you can't ever do things for yourself, you always have to have somebody there to do it for you; **well, yes you children** have an easy time of it nowadays doing nothing. **Yes I had it very differently** when I was a boy like George here who is just a lazy good for nothing. I didn't have *all these new fangled notions*. I was already earning my own living and giving myself my own education. **Well! What! yes! well I say it to you**, you have no idea what an easy time you children all have nowadays just doing nothing. And my poor mother, peace be with her, she never had her *own house and all kinds of servants* to wait on her like your mother. **Yes, well, your mother** has everything I can give her, not that she don't deserve everything I can give her, Miss Jenny is the best girl I know and she will always have it as easy as I can make it for her, but you children, you never have done anything yet to make it right that you should always be having everything so easy to you. **Yes, I say to you**, I don't see with *all these modern improvements* to always spoil you, you ever will be good to work hard like your father. **No all these** *modern kinds of improvements* never can do any good to anybody. **Yes, what, well, tell me**, you all like to be always explaining to me, **tell me exactly** what you are going to get from all these *your expensive modern kinds of ways of doing*. **Well I say, just tell me** some kind of way so that I can understand you. **You know I like to get** good value for my money, I always had a name for being pretty good at trading, **I say, you know I like to know** just what I am getting for my money and **you children** do certainly cost a great deal of my money, **now I say, tell me**, I am glad to listen to you, **I say you tell me** just what you are going to do, to make it good all this money. **Well what, what are** *all these kinds of improvements* going to do for you.' (Stein 35–7; my emphases)

The paragraphs from this excerpt (and from a larger context of this section) seem to share a rhythmic patter of affirmation and negation. The paragraph with Dehning's direct speech significantly relies on almost exclusively affirmative sentence beginnings, although the nature of this significance remains unclear for the reader. The paragraph reproduces some of the repetition patterns of the novel: *The Making of Americans* relies on longer and shorter variations of patterns, repeated in, for example, radiating relationship where the longer variants set the base theme

for a paragraph, opening and closing it. Shorter variants differ from each other only minutely or not at all. In the quoted paragraph, the rhythm is set by the affirmative, similar or same openings of sentences and clauses (marked in bold) and the father's speech circles around two major themes: that his children have it very easy nowadays, unlike he had in his time (underlined marking), and that this is because of all kinds of modern improvements (marked in italics) whose value he questions. The effect from reading a narration structured this way becomes stupefying after several pages.

Whilst to interpret Semenko's poems, readers did not need to comprehend them unambiguously (that is, they did not need to assign exclusive meanings to certain words or phrases) or did not need to comprehend them at all, to interpret Stein's novel readers need to rely on information that is comprehended. But how does one hold all the information relevant for interpretation in mind? A reading strategy conventional for a novel – that is, proceeding in a linear manner; recognizing the text's language and syntax; assigning semantic meanings and, on their basis, constructing the novel's story – does not bring much. And as there is no story, there is, arguably, not much motivation to go on reading. So, what a particularly persistent reader can do is to look for another reading strategy and circumstances in which this text can have meaning.

In the case of *The Making of Americans* an ingenious solution has been offered, for example, by Clement, who used digital tools to 'distant-read' the book by using text-mining tools and 'looking at the text "from a distance" through textual analytics and visualizations' (361). Having processed the novel's repetitions computationally, she was able to establish meaningful patterns that divide the novel into two structurally significant halves: the first half produces a narrative about a family and the second half functions 'to develop complexities and contradictions that complicate the knowledge produced in the first half … by using the same words and sequences introduced there, but using them in variation' (373). Moreover, within the two halves taken separately the repetitions stand in particular relation to each other. As Clement was able to establish, for example, there are alternations between the narrative and the repetitive sections in the first half that, once visible, can then be interpreted. In Clement's interpretation they serve as a comment on 'the circular nature of the Hersland family identity (in terms of its physical, familiar inheritance) and its history (in terms of its telling)' (376). But this already leads me to the question of what other reading strategies are at play in comprehension and interpretation of difficult texts and what their developments are.

Reading the unreadable

Describing the nature of unreadability, I mentioned that it is a quality of texts (and, simultaneously, an effect on readers) that cannot be easily naturalized or narrativized. While Enkvist's three-level model offers an understanding of the roots of unreadability and its effects, strategies of naturalization and narrativization contribute to a more specific description of procedures of reading. In what follows I shall give a short overview of these strategies and suggest that they have been predominantly extrapolated from and tested on narrative prose fiction. In other kinds of literary texts, they inevitably fail.

Naturalization in the broad sense refers to the act of reading itself (Culler 160): that is, to the act of understanding literature. In a more specific way, naturalization refers to five groups – or levels – of reading strategies that are involved in comprehension (naturalization of the first three levels) and interpretation (levels 4 and 5) of literature (Culler 140–59). In a nutshell, these strategies put a text in relation to what makes it comprehensible. Naturalization thus implies an act of relating a literary text to: (1) the 'real world', which means conformity (of a literary text) to what one believes is possible, or masking of 'the text's own laws' (139) and genre conventions, which makes the reader believe a text conforms to reality; (2) culture and cultural knowledge, which explain how readers comprehend stereotypes and culture-specific references – what is considered 'normal' or 'decent', and so on; (3) conventions of the text's genre, author's style, period and artistic agenda that 'make certain relevant expectations operative and thus … permit both compliance with and deviation from accepted modes of [comprehension]' (147); and (4) writing in general or narrative act in particular. Naturalization of level 5 stands somewhat apart, being a complex strategy of navigating within specific intertextualities that are at play, for example in the recognition and comprehension of parody or irony. Today Culler's model remains one of the most comprehensive, although unnatural narratologists have recently suggested several overviews of reading strategies at work in the understanding of difficult texts. These observations, for example in Alber ('Impossible Storyworlds', 'Unnatural Narratology'), nevertheless directly rely on the model of naturalization levels.[6]

In the descriptions above of the traditional reading strategies, as well as reading according to the new ones, I have already partially invoked the naturalization practices of level 3. Culler calls them 'models of a genre' (145), which subsume various strategies of making a

literary text intelligible, ranging from a general understanding of fiction to a specific set of literary norms of a genre (e.g. of Futurist poetry) and of a particular author's style and aesthetic-political agenda (e.g. Stein's views on the functions and form of the novel). These conventions make a text intelligible but, as Culler notes, are very often invoked in order to be subverted (148) and thus go hand in hand with the strategies of level 4. Naturalization level 4 groups those devices that aim at exposing 'the artifice of generic conventions and expectations' (148), which contributes to my enquiry into the reading strategies of experimental texts. As Culler himself notes, a naturalization procedure of this level 'becomes the most important' in reading of such texts because 'in one sense it has the advantage of being less reductive than others, for it need not resolve a difficulty but can recognize that what requires interpretation is the existence of a difficulty more than the difficulty itself' (151). This type of naturalization means taking into account implicit or explicit information, often from the text itself, that the text is not following literary conventions or does not make its meaning comply with generic expectations. Introductions to eighteenth-century novels or metacommentary work this way explicitly.

My examples above go about subverting the conventions of comprehension and interpretation applicable, for example, to romanticist poetry and narrative novels more subtly through formal experiments. A successful reading of these texts thus takes into account that the limits of literature's potential are only constrained by the limits of language. To naturalize a text this way means to interpret it 'as a narrator's [or author's, NB] exercise of language and production of meaning' and 'to read it as a statement about the writing of novels, a critique of mimetic fiction, an illustration of the production of a world by language' (Culler 150). This strategy, for example, describes the skipping of comprehension in Semenko's poems as an irresolvable difficulty, or recognizes the interpretative potential in these difficulties with intelligibility.

Thus, difficulties on the levels of intelligibility and/or comprehensibility, as I already mentioned, do not impede interpretation, even if they are irresolvable. To quote Enkvist again: 'a text is interpretable to those who can, under the prevailing circumstances, build around it a text world – or scenario, if you prefer the term – in which that text makes sense' (9). Strategies of naturalization, especially those of the levels 3 and 4, explain the processes of such 'world-building' in the reading of the poems above: identifying the genre of these texts as poems activates a certain set of reading conventions that are then modified according to the placement of the poems – in this case, in the tradition of Futurism,

which further suggests how these particular difficulties in intelligibility can be interpreted. The matter is more difficult with *The Making of Americans*. The novel extends the logic of the two poems, in that it defies syntax and complicates semantic comprehension but, at the same time, it cannot be naturalized and 'solved' with the same tactics. Being a prose text, it resists narrativization strategy (level 3) and may be seen as relying on lyrical logic (level 4 as a break in a convention of the novelistic form). But the sheer volume of possible meaning patterns, allusions and semantic ambiguities that can be constructed within the 900 pages of the novel does not encourage the same close reading as the four lines of the first Semenko poem would. The unreadablity comes from the intolerance for this scope of repetitions and patterns, as the reader's attempts to trace the novel's structural meaning or to progress by constructing and engaging with its storyworld, characters, action and so on are not rewarded.

Interpretation as the ability to build a text world or a scenario is, in other words, a possession of adequate reading strategies for the text. Readability, to reiterate, depends as much on the reader as it does on the text: the goal of reading, the situation of reading, the reader's education or familiarity with the given genre and its context, language skills, concentration and so on. Certain texts, for example, already signal the need for a new approach before reading: the cultural status of, for example, James Joyce's or Stein's novels, will invite the reader to prepare for a 'difficult text' with 'accompanying books necessary to "read" the primary texts' (Orr 124), which include criticism, biography, interviews, annotations, companions, guidebooks, commentary and so on. But even having prepared myself for *The Making of Americans*, I might not be able to 'read' it: I might get bored with failing to make sense of the text, or frustrated or otherwise uncomfortable with it.[7] Such resistance to reading this novel is caused by the its resistance to one particular strategy of reading, namely, to narrativization. Orr, referring to Stein, Samuel Beckett and Joyce, describes these texts as 'non-linear', in that they 'announce their beginnings again and again, [and] there either are no characters or the characters are mere tokens, almost grammatical subject placeholders subservient to the rhythms and seemingly unmotivated variegated flows, repeated phrases, and stops of language' (Orr 125–6). In other words, the structures and progression that he describes as non-linear are, in fact, non-narrative. Thus, in order to be read, texts that resist narrativization have to be processed (comprehended and interpreted) with the help of a new, more fitting reading strategy. Looking for a story will be frustrating as there is no story to uncover. Clement's data-mining approach, mentioned above, is one such example of going through a non-narrative novel

that opens up new possibilities for its interpretation after reading, outsourced to a computer.

This still leaves the question of what to do during reading of a difficult, obscure text that is also frustrating for these reasons. Unnatural narratologists have been suggesting approaches to difficult (as well as already naturalized) texts that can illuminate the reading process in these cases, but most of them either repeat the model of naturalization or implicitly rely on narrative logic of the texts under discussion: for example, strategies that aim to resolve textual difficulties with reference to storyworld logic mirroring that of the 'real world' (see Alber, 'Unnatural Narratology'). *The Making of Americans* announces a family story of generations, yet at the same time it does not offer a narrative that could help structure the havoc of meanings. To get through the novel, without the help of the computer, one needs different expectations for the kind of meanings the novel will produce – different from those for narrative novels – but also a different attitude to the reading process.

To conclude this section, I would like to look into one potentially productive suggestion, the so-called *Zen reading* mode (rather than an active 'strategy'): that is, reading with less or no pressure to make everything cohere and signify. Zen reading, without having any meaningful ties to Buddhist tradition and practices, has been called as such by Alber in a few of his articles on reading strategies. It is 'a radical alternative to … moves of sense making' (Alber, 'Unnatural Narratology' 454) – moves that are, arguably, inherent to human nature. They are, as Culler observes, 'one of the basic activities of the mind. We can, it seems, make anything signify' (138). Arguably, these moves are what then frustrate the reader in a text such as *The Making of Americans*, as the novel refuses to satisfy them. And so, if surrendered to accepting obscurities as they come, the reader might find pleasure in understanding or in naturalizing at the more basic levels of intelligibility and comprehension – for example, in admiring rhythmical sentence patterns – and leave out the more overarching connections and interpretation. An idea similar to that of Zen reading has also been put forward by Susan Sontag in her essay 'Against Interpretation' as the call for resisting the naturalizing translation of 'the elements of the poem or play or novel or story into something else' (7) – something this text is not – and accepting the work, together with one's affective responses to it.[8]

So, in other words, Zen reading is a way of recognizing, accepting and preserving the estranging or frustrating effects of unreadability that resists the default responses to the text (cf. also Abbott, 'Unreadable Minds'; Gallop). Zen reading is, basically, a reading mode – rather

than a strategy – that can overcome emotional and physical discomfort caused by the inability to easily comprehend and interpret certain texts. However, it has two implications that come out of its descriptions: a passive, contemplative one and a productive one aimed at meaning-making. It remains a question whether a passive contemplation can be convincing when we deal with unreadability as an overarching textual strategy: a mere recognition that a poem is unreadable would mean putting it down, stopping short of reading and thus denying its understanding.[9] In Culler's vocabulary, Zen reading will mean avoiding certain types of naturalization, those of higher levels, which 'one cannot avoid … if one seeks to speak of literary works' (160). On the one hand, then, Zen reading is not about postponing interpretative conclusions; it is about not making them. In this sense, it is complete as a reading mode as such. On the other hand, Zen reading might be conceived of as a pre-interpretative strategy or during-the-reading mode that cuts off (stereo)typical inferential walks or conventional sense-making strategies and is promising in that it opens up a text to fresh perspectives. In this case, it is an initial stance that should be followed by an interpretation, if the reader wants to create a scenario in which the textual elements can cohere and make sense.

Conclusion

A text is likely to be deemed unreadable if the reader encounters difficulties in comprehending it, and if adequate strategies of either interpretation or reading – or both – are not available or not looked for. But if the reader accepts the difficulties as a textual strategy, she can look for ways of building a scenario around the text in which it will be readable. After all, the discomfort of the 'unreadable is, by and large, unendurable', and 'one way or another, readers will find some strategy to make it go away' (Abbott, 'Unreadable Minds' 435). As is often pointed out, we can make nearly anything signify. Even with the most obscure Futurist poem 'the results', as Orr comments, 'are never nonsensical, meaningless, because of the ingenuity and desire of the interpreter' (129). At the same time, if 'the readers' predilection to discover coherence and fill in everything that is needed to make a complete reading takes precedence' (Orr 130), then such readers run into difficulties when struggling with coherence and complete readings of certain experimental novels. A conscious effort to work against such immediate meaning-making moves can be a helpful strategy of getting through difficult texts, as the idea of Zen reading suggests.

To sum up, unreadability means a number of things: from illegibility to difficulties in interpretation or readerly disinterest. In this chapter, my goal was to look into the textual roots of unreadability, rather than to support or discourage one of its meanings. Taken as a difficulty in the text, unreadability can refer to complications on one – or all – levels of textual understanding, mostly referring to the incomprehensible and uninterpretable. Since these levels are interrelated during any reading, unreadable as uninterpretable derives from the level of comprehension: if the amount of comprehended (semantic) information is more than 'what the relevant [reader] can comfortably handle under the relevant circumstances' (Enkvist 18), such texts resist interpretation. The two poems I offered as examples of unreadability on the levels of intelligibility and comprehension are unreadable in terms of certain strategies of naturalization unless the reader accepts the impossibility of comprehension and skips to the level of interpretation. *The Making of Americans* is unreadable in terms of semantic density unless the reader looks for a new way of processing it. Thus, ultimately, unreadability does not exist.